



## After the Nouvelle Vague

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STEPHEN TAYLOR

## After the Nouvelle Vague

A good time to look in on a vanguard, once it has won its initial battles, is during the crisis of regroupment which inevitably ensues. In France, the flood of new productions by the Nouvelle Vague's followers caused a severe distribution backwash and a financing crisis for all except obviously commercial projects. The most persistent and astute directors, however have managed to continue working. To make *Contempt*, Jean-Luc Godard accepted a million dollars and Brigitte Bardot from Joseph E. Levine, who, as everyone knows, is Lorenzo the Magnificent of a cinema whose products are tailored to the distributor's measurements. By the same token, François Truffaut has been able to parlay his new authority into something like an academic appointment; not only is he writing a book on the films of Alfred Hitchcock; but in his latest film, *The Soft Skin*, he manages what amounts to a thesis in dual homage to those techniques of Hitchcock's that have captivated the French and those techniques of Truffaut's that have captivated Truffaut. Of the two, Truffaut's would seem to be the lesser concession if it were not for the fact that he has succeeded so very well in making it. Godard, meanwhile, was so disrespectful of his million dollars that even Stanley Kauffmann, writing in *The New Republic*, scored him for "the nonchalance with which he treats an expensive medium." Nonchalant or not, *Contempt* is proof enough that all that money failed to inspire Godard with much in the way of awe.

The thesis-like aspects of *The Soft Skin* originate in Truffaut's adherence to current academic canons with something like the zeal of a newly graduated scholar. His attention to detail is scrupulous, he exhausts his incontestably enormous technical virtuosity on a subject that

stubbornly refuses to be enriched by the illumination he brings to it, and, most irritating of all, he maintains that dubious objectivity known as scholarly self-effacement. And these from the man whose three previous films, culminating in *Jules and Jim*, promised that he was learning how to bypass mere compassion (a quality by now doped out with such refinement that any second rate director can build it into his picture as easily as he can make them "stimulating," "provocative," "arresting," or what have you) in favor of affection, which is perhaps less lofty a sentiment but infinitely harder to make ring true on film.

Now, having exchanged this affection for his characters in favor of a vaguely sympathetic directorial omniscience, about the only thing other than camerawork and fast cutting that links *The Soft Skin* with Truffaut's earlier work is the persistence of the theme of wounded naiveté. The story concerns one Pierre Lachenay (Jean Desailly), a starchy, stuffy, solidly married publisher of a literary review who is delighted when he discovers a little lechery in himself, confused when it turns to love, and surprised when it ruins his marriage. Nicole (Françoise Dorleac), the airline stewardess with whom Lachenay has his liaison, is precisely the sort of girl—wholesomely vapid, wholesomely pretty—to whom the world's airlines prefer to entrust the comfort of their passengers; she juggles coffee, tea, milk, and love affairs with an efficiency just barren enough to confirm the suspicion that concupiscence is pretty much the only one of her attributes not specifically taught her in stewardess training school. As the affair takes on more and more complexity—and in the manner of Hitchcock the complexity is circumstantial, not psychological—Lachenay proves to be indeed too naive to cope with it.

His naiveté, however, owes nothing to idealism or cynicism or to that ingratiating tendency in Truffaut's earlier characters to have their adolescences hotly pursue them into manhood. Lachenay is simply an overgrown baby fully in accord with Western industrial society's concept of the mature adult. Among his gadgets and conveniences, his comfortable family, comfortable apartment, and comfortable job (he seems to edit not a literary review but a weekly newsletter at Young and Rubicam), his childishness appears as self-enforced as it is essential to the routinized and desensitized existence that is the natural concomitant of voluntary participation in our social machinery as it now stands.

Yet, to make quarrels with the characters tantamount to quarrels with the film would be decidedly inappropriate if *The Soft Skin* were, as Truffaut says, about "modern love; it takes place in planes, in elevators; it has all the harassments of modern life." But, on screen, the characters are in perfect harmony with the objects and devices that clutter their lives; it is finally they themselves who harass one another. Toward the end of the film, for example, Lachenay demonstrates his love for Nicole neither with fancy words nor fancy deeds but by showing her the fancy apartment they will live in. And Nicole, in rejecting him, gives every indication that she is one of those "emancipated" women who resent being relegated by men to the status of objects and then exercise their mancipation by choosing freely to *become* objects. From all available evidence one has to conclude that objects, far from being a source of harassment to these people, are their final consolation. Which is why the last scene of the film, despite the widespread objection it met with, stands in some ways as Truffaut's cleverest touch. For not only does Lachenay's fiercely possessive wife, having learned of her husband's adventures, at last perform a thoroughly human and passionately honest act in killing him; she invokes the double irony of blasting him with a shotgun that might have appeared in an Abercrombie and Fitch catalog, and while he is lunching at a Paris restaurant

that looks as if it were modeled, down to the last formica panel, on an Upper East Side ersatz bistro.

What remain to be enjoyed in *The Soft Skin* are the many stretches of superbly realized film for its own sake. Raoul Coutard's photography is present in all its inquisitive and nervous inspiration, and Truffaut has edited his footage in a staccato, almost pointillistic fashion, so that, increment by increment, the feeling of being in a plane or car or elevator is ingeniously recreated. But, ultimately, because Truffaut's eye is still so deadly accurate, we miss the added presence of his sensibility so much the more. We have Hollywood to give us swatches of the social fabric; it was the moths in it that the old Truffaut best understood and best depicted. *The Soft Skin* lacks nothing less than the force of its director's personality. It is Truffaut without Truffaut.

In *Contempt*, by contrast, Godard's sensibility almost completely replaces what would be the inner logic of a more conventional story. Never are we allowed to feel that the film is proceeding by dint of its own momentum, with the director serving merely to isolate the inherent inexorability of the circumstances and then speed the story on to its conclusion. There happens, in fact, to be no trace of inexorability in the circumstances of *Contempt*, and only very loosely do they comprise a story. Instead we are presented with characters, an indeterminate situation, an infinity of options, possibilities, and variously relevant details, and, in place of the likelihood that anything will be resolved, only unrelieved uncertainty. The control Godard exerts over his film—however personal or arrogant or arbitrary it might seem—is the sole reason for *Contempt's* not decomposing into chaos on the one hand or degenerating into bathos on the other. To juxtapose *The Soft Skin* and *Contempt* and then observe that both were made by Nouvelle Vague directors (who are friends to boot), that both were photographed by Raoul Coutard, that Georges Delerue's extremely narrow-ranged music can be heard on both soundtracks, that both concern

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literate men bewildered by their love lives, and that both end in sudden violence, is still to find the two films miles apart. What makes it interesting to examine both at the same time is that, despite a proneness to lump these directors together, Truffaut's modest, craftsmanly, reticent approach differs so sharply from Godard's assertive one that we have, virtually ready-made, not only a thesis and antithesis to Oscar Wilde's proposition that in art there is no first person, but an example of the kind of art to which the first person is absolutely essential.

There are two subjects (or, better, primary situations) in *Contempt*, the filming of Homer's *Odyssey* and the puzzlement of the man just hired to write the screenplay when his wife's love for him is replaced abruptly by contempt. The relationship between these subjects is complex and full of questions; Godard stays clear of the well-made storyteller's coy omniscience, confining himself instead to the collection and presentation of an almost haphazard array of evidence. He attempts neither to try a case nor to implicate, as the source of his characters' unhappiness, one of those disembodied, perennially available scapegoats who go by names like "decadence," "affluence," or "urban alienation." Certainly these and their confrères make their presences felt in *Contempt*, but passively, as spectators, as part of the atmosphere. This attenuating of social forces without altogether scrapping them has always been central to Godard's method. His characters are very much alone on their respective stages; shadows of their environment stalk them quietly but never challenge their prominence as protagonists. They are, in a word (the existential argot might as well be used where it pertains), responsible.

Of the two subjects mentioned, each has its own pair of principal characters. Paul and Camille are the married couple who become estranged when Camille's love turns to loathing, and Jeremy Prokosch and Fritz Lang (Jack Palance and Fritz Lang) are respectively the producer and director involved in the proposed filming of the *Odyssey*. A fifth character, Francesca (Georgia Moll), who is Prokosch's trans-



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lator, secretary, and doubtless a good deal more, functions as a linguistic link between the pairs, since Prokosch, an American, speaks only English and both Paul and Camille speak only French. (Just to round out the picture, Francesca and Lang are variously competent in English, French, German, and Italian.)

This is where Godard's somewhat gimmicky and yet astonishingly successful approach to the cliché-battered communication problem comes into play. Onto what is otherwise a reasonably faithful transposition of Moravia's novel *A Ghost at Noon*, he first superimposes a kind of miniature Babel and then constrains it with a set of rules worthy of a Parker Brothers game. In Prokosch's presence, the semi-privacy in which Paul and Camille may carry on their disputes depends wholly on Francesca's declining to translate their French. Similarly, Lang and Prokosch often argue their conflicting interpretations of the *Odyssey* while Paul has only Lang's occasional French wisecracks to save him from total bafflement. When Prokosch

talks about the film to Paul ("talks" is really incorrect; Palance speaks Prokosch's lines in a brutally declamatory style—as though he were admonishing a horde of marauding barbarians), Lang, who is usually within earshot and abhors both Prokosch and his opinions, is compelled to listen to each statement twice, first the English, then Francesca's almost sardonically demure rendering into French. And worst of all, Camille has to put up with Prokosch's endless propositions, these generally in the form of a collection of leers, vaguely salacious gestures, and a few phrases bellowed in (to her) incomprehensible English, followed by Francesca's genteel translation into something like "Mr. Prokosch wishes to know if you would be so kind to join him in . . ."

But linguistic inconsistency is only half the problem; along with the confusion of languages is an additional confusion of quotations. Lang, for instance, habitually couches his opinions and responses in quoted poetry, his taste leaning to those lonely verses of Holderlin of which Heidegger was so fond. Paul likewise augments his conversation with borrowed phrases and ideas—not only with poetry but with the sort of stories that set out to be serious parables and end in the self-mockery of a trite punch line. And Prokosch, not to be outdone, regularly salts his bombast with epigrams—each more irrelevant than the last—which he reads out of a tiny compilation in the manner of a supercilious schoolboy. Early in the film, when we first recognize this pattern of eccentricities, we might make the premature assumption that the point of it all is to demonstrate that Paul and Lang are steeped in a species of natively European acculturation from which Prokosch, owing to his venality, his *gaucherie*, and his very Americanness, is permanently excluded. But the quotations start rolling in in quantity, along with spoken footnotes identifying their sources. "B.B. said that." (Bardot is on screen.) "Ah, yes. Bertolt Brecht." And the effect becomes something else entirely. Paul and Lang, no less than Prokosch, cannot *help* but speak this way. Each is in fact quite securely isolated from his own spontaneity and, as pronouncements come

to be increasingly embedded in quotation marks, even from his own speech. A major component of the ambience that pervades *Contempt* is the hint of a growing delirium as each goes fishing in his reservoir of aphorisms, *bons mots*, parables, and memorized poetry for the proper metaphor, the proper phrase, the epigram that will impart authority, validity, and even reality to his feelings.

This, mainly, is what *Contempt* is all about. It is about the false comfort gained in seeing your feelings echoed in "great books," about the debilitating habit of commiserating with great authors and great characters, about the danger of forcing great works of the past—even the past itself—into conformity with your present circumstances. Godard rejects the device in which a modern story is made to run parallel with an ancient myth, in this case Paul and Camille's ruined marriage with the *Odyssey*. If anything, the tension in *Contempt* can be ascribed to the *Odyssey's* adamant refusal to illuminate Paul's difficulties. Because Paul has lost his wife's love he wants to reinterpret the *Odyssey* to personal terms: he wants Ulysses' failure to return promptly to Ithaca to be motivated by an awareness that Penelope no longer loves him. But, as Lang maintains, the *Odyssey* is simply not that flexible. It cannot and will not bend. In both time and feeling it is too far off. Prokosch has transported a crew to Capri to shoot the exteriors of his film, but when Godard's camera pans away from the frenzy and frivolity of film-making and stops to peer along the steep island slopes out into the Mediterranean horizon, the fallacy of Paul's thinking is made explicit. What to Paul and the others is a picturesque movie set was, to Homer's Greeks, the world itself. When, every so often, without preparing us, Godard intercuts the present-day proceedings of *Contempt* with sequences from the Lang *Odyssey* in progress, and we see a Greek dressed in coarse clothing and carrying a crude sword climb out of the water onto the rocks, we are reminded that what a second ago was pretty scenery is now environment and potentially a very brutal one. Everything we are shown of these Lang-

Homer Greeks—the violent smears of color on their statuary, their moving like bad dancers, their faces painted almost like those of circus clowns—lays stress on their alienness, on the discontinuity between their time and ours. The *Odyssey* that Lang means to sneak past Prokosch's vigil is one from which we may inherit poetry and nothing more. To corrupt it with our own dilemmas wrongs and weakens both it and us.

Needless to say, this is not the sort of thematic material one encounters in the usual course of film-going. And when films do get this serious they are more often than not so bloated with pretensions that movie-house seats begin feeling like church pews or chairs at museum lectures. But if Godard has any one surpassing virtue it is an ability to make a serious point or two without bringing on the familiar stench of profundity. Perhaps this more than anything else is what puts so many people off him. To someone accustomed to having his insights served up in the form of epiphanies, Godard is bound to seem somewhat casual or frivolous, and since there is nothing particularly grandiloquent or pietistic about his approach either to his themes or to movie-making, a charge of nonchalance is really as perfectly legitimate as it is irrelevant.

Roughly midway through *Contempt*, for example, Godard confines Raoul Coutard—armed to the teeth though he is with Technicolor, CinemaScope, and a wonderful flair for outdoor camerawork—to the few rooms of an apartment for fully half an hour, this in defiance of the fact that Rome and Capri are right outside and blazing with visuals. The flat belongs to Paul and Camille, and it is to finish paying for it that Paul has reluctantly signed up to write Prokosch's film. A pivotal incident has just taken place. After inviting Paul and Camille to come to his villa to negotiate Paul's contract, Prokosch has insisted that Camille ride with him to the villa—he has only a two-seater—and Paul, over his wife's protestations, has permitted (or at least failed to forbid) her to go with Prokosch while he himself has to go alone by taxi. With a tiny but significant

kernel of his wife's honor at stake, Paul has answered Prokosch's ballsiness with tolerant passivity. Now, in the apartment, he learns that this has cost him his wife's love, and for half an hour he tries to discover why he is being made to pay so dearly. For half an hour, going from room to room, traversing hallways, opening and shutting doors, moving from bathtub to bed to kitchen to sofa, he probes, clowns, reasons, argues, analyzes, tempts, caresses, reminisces, slaps, shouts, engages in every coercive activity at his disposal, and still Camille does not yield up the truth of what has happened. He begins the half hour in high curiosity and ends it in helpless frustration.

Conceivably all of this might have been compressed into two or three minutes of playing time. Conceivably Paul and Camille might have been two more of those neatly drawn dramatic characters who can package all their feelings in a few cogent sentences and be done with their disagreements in no time flat. Paul, for that matter, asks nothing more of Camille, his rhetorically undistinguished twenty-eight-year-old typist of a wife, than a telling phrase, a bit of logic, a reasonable explanation, any tidy bundle of words that he can easily get his mind around. If she could supply only that, then he and Camille and Coutard and all of us spectators could go back out into the sun, into the Roman streets and to Capri, out among all that scenery.

Unfortunately for most of us, however, scenery is the stuff of vacations. The bulk of our lives—working, arguing, loving, learning, understanding, failing to understand, deciding—is conducted between walls, in rooms. It is in classrooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, factories, offices and laboratories that most of us experience and will continue to experience our most crucial moments. We have chosen to live that way, and a cinema that is faithful to our life style must accustom itself to that basic fact of our lives and must evolve techniques that encompass it. Godard is doing just that and doing it well. Assuredly his successes are erratic and incomplete, but there is still every reason to bear with him.